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ABSTRACT

To test the cross-cultural validity of uncertainty reduction theory, a study was conducted using students from South Korea and the United States who were chosen to represent high- and low-context cultures respectively. Uncertainty reduction theory is based upon the assumption that the primary concern of strangers upon meeting is one of uncertainty reduction, or of increasing predictability of the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction. The high-context/low-context culture distinction depends on the amount of contextual information left unstated in typical communication settings--Korean leaves much unstated, while American English spells out much information explicitly. Subjects, 88 Korean students at Yonsei university and 62 native American English speakers at the University of Massachusetts, responded to a questionnaire in their own language designed to determine the kind of information they would exchange upon first meeting someone. Results indicated little difference between the two types of culture with regard to interpersonal patterns in initial interactions. In both cultures, people exchanged background information more than sociability or personal interests and attitude and had a higher degree of certainty in their prediction of sociability than in their prediction of personal interests and attitude. (Seven tables of results and 10 references are appended.) (SKC)

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UNCERTAINTY REDUCTION THEORY IN HIGH- AND LOW-CONTEXT CULTURES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to test the cross-cultural validity of uncertainty reduction theory developed by Berger and Calabrese (1975). Students from Korea and the United States have been chosen to represent high- and low-context cultures respectively. Results show that there is little difference between two types of cultures with regard to interpersonal communication patterns in initial interactions. In both types of cultures, people exchange 'background' more than 'sociability' and 'personal interests and attitude' in initial interactions and have a higher degree of certainty in their prediction of 'sociability' than that of 'personal interests and attitude'.

It is not too absurd to assert that almost all theories of human communication are products of the Western culture. Studies of communication if not dead, have not been actively pursued in the East at least in terms of theory-building. The researchers take this paucity as a starting point of developing a theoretical ground which is inherent to the Eastern culture. As a first step, the researchers tried to examine the cross-cultural validity of uncertainty reduction theory.

Berger and Calabrese (1975) developed uncertainty reduction theory based upon the assumption that "when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction" (p.100). Among various attempts to test and further to implement the theory, Berger himself (1975) suggested two types of attribution processes which serve the function of reducing uncertainty. Proactive attribution generates predictions about the probable behaviors and beliefs a person holds while retroactive attribution provides a plausible explanation of a person's present actions and beliefs based upon prior information of that person. A series of studies done by Berger and his colleagues (Berger, Munley & Clatterbuck, 1976; Prisbell & Anderson, 1980) identified linkages among uncertainty reduction, similarity and attraction. Along with relationship development, people tend to perceive information sequencing from the least intimate to the most intimate (Berger, Gardner, Clatterbuck & Schulman, 1976). However, a cross-cultural study

of patterns of topic sequencing done by Alexander and her associates (1986) indicates that different cultures may have different sequences of self-disclosing topics.

Despite a number of studies having been done based upon uncertainty reduction theory, the lack of interest in approaching the theory from a cross-cultural perspective drew the attention of the concerned. Among those concerned, William B. Gudykunst (1983) raised a question on the applicability of uncertainty reduction theory across cultures. The results of his study show that "people in high-context cultures are more cautious in initial interactions and have a great tendency to make assumptions based upon a stranger's cultural background than do people in low-context cultures" (p.49).

The purpose of the current research is to find differences and/or similarities in reducing uncertainty and predicting behavior in initial interactions in high- and low-context cultures.

Culture and Communication

"Types of culture" (high-context cultures and low-context cultures) is defined in accordance with E. T. Hall's (1976) concept of high- and low-context cultures and Basil Bernstein's (1971) notion of elaborated and restricted codes. Combining these two concepts, high-context cultures are defined as the culture whose typical communication or message is one in which

most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while there is very little information in the coded explicit part of the message. On the other hand, low-context cultures are defined as the culture whose typical communication or message take forms of explicit codes.

The definition of another key concept "uncertainty reduction" was adopted from Berger and Calabrese (1975). They defined uncertainty reduction as increasing predictability about the behavior between strangers in initial interactions.

In this research, the researchers distinguished the dimensions of information for a more detailed analysis of uncertainty reduction process. When Alexander et al. (1986) studied patterns of topic sequencing and information gain, they used four dimensions of information exchanged by two strangers by using factor analysis. The categorized four dimensions of information are: (1) perceived knowledge of intellectual/academic potential; (2) sociability; (3) personal similarity; and (4) background similarity (p.73). In our research, we excluded the first dimension and modified the names of the third and the fourth factors (`personal similarity' became `personal interest and attitude' and `background similarity' became `background'). The reasons for the exclusion of the dimension of `perceived knowledge of intellectual/academic potential' are: first, it does not seem appropriate as a conversational topic between strangers; second, sample of the original research was college students; third, that dimension is partially overlapping with the dimension

of personal interest and attitude.

'Background' information is comprised of biographical and demographic information, including major in college, hometown, name, etc. The 'sociability' dimension deals with information about poise displayed by the persons in social situations, whether the participants would like to meet each other again, spend time together, become friends and fit each other into their existing circle of friends (Alexander et al., p. 73). The 'personal interest and attitude' dimension includes favorite sports, opinion about society, and attitude toward religion, etc.

Five hypotheses were developed based upon the findings of previous research. According to Berger (1975), a number of studies have revealed that the first two or three minutes of interaction between strangers are dominated by requests for and giving of biographical and demographic information (p.34). The researchers assumed that this tendency existed in high-context cultures as well. However, respondents were asked to imagine a hypothetical situation of meeting a stranger for ten minutes. By extending interaction time, the researchers tried to identify information sequencing patterns beyond background information.

H 1: In both high- and low-context cultures, people will interrogate or talk more about background than sociability or personal interest and attitude in initial interactions.

Gudykunst (1983) found out that members of high-context culture ask more questions regarding a stranger's background in initial interactions than members of low-context culture. It can be interpreted that members of high-context culture tend to ask questions (whatever the topic is) more frequently than members of low-context culture. With regard to conversational topics, members of high-context culture seem to be more interested in 'background' information than members of low-context culture, whether they ask or talk.

H 2: Members of high-context cultures will have a greater tendency to interrogate or talk about background in initial interactions than members of low-context cultures.

H 3: Members of high-context cultures will have a greater tendency to ask questions in initial interactions than members of low-context cultures.

When Gudykunst (1983) tested a research question, "Do members of high-context culture have a higher degree of certainty in their prediction based upon background information than members of low-context culture?", he could not find any significant difference between two groups. However, Alexander et al.(1986) found that Chinese respondents infer significantly more knowledge about another from the preliminary information they receive when first introduced than do Americans. Although these

two results are conflicting with each other, we made our fourth hypothesis more in line with the study done by Alexander et al.:

H 4: Members of high-context cultures will have a higher degree of certainty in their prediction based upon background information than members of low-context cultures.

The final hypothesis was to uncover differences in degrees of certainty in predictions about three dimensions of information. The results of preceding studies show that most people tend to predict the other's interest, attitude, and sociability based on his/her 'background' information (Berger, 1975; Berger, Gardener, Clatterbuck & Schulman, 1976; Gudykunst, 1983; Alexander, Cronen, Kang, Tsou & Banks, 1986). For example, Berger (1975) asserts that biographical and demographic information not only provides a basis for forming proactive attributions (prediction of present and future behavior), such information also becomes relevant to the generation of retroactive attributions (explanation of present behavior) as the interaction progress (p. 34). Therefore, it is assumed that information about both 'personal interest and attitude' and 'sociability' is predicted based upon information about 'background.' It is hypothesized according to the results of Berger et al.'s study (1976) that people tend to ask strangers questions about 'personal interest and attitude' earlier than his 'sociability' in initial interactions.

H 5: In both high-and low-context cultures, people will have a higher degree of certainty in their prediction about personal interest and attitude than about sociability.

Methods

For data collection, social surveys using a questionnaire were employed in each type of culture. Although the social survey method has some weaknesses - for example, it tends to urge respondents to stay in an imaginary situation rather than in a real situation - we chose the method because of time/financial restrictions and convenience. Sampling process is also perplexing work since this is a comparative study of two types of cultures. Due to difficulty in categorizing cultures precisely, the researchers selected arbitrarily one culture from Asia and the other from the West as representing high- and low-context cultures respectively. College students in Korea and U. S. have been chosen as samples representing two types of cultures. As a precautionary statement, researchers would like to draw the attention of readers that there might be some differences in initial interactions between a population as a whole and a student population.

The total number of respondents was 150; 88 students of Yonsei University in Korea were selected as samples representing high-context cultures while 62 students of University of Massachusetts representing low-context cultures. The sampling

criteria are subjects (1) who have been exposed to opposite cultures no more than one month and (2) whose age was 18 to 25 years old. The rationale of sampling criteria is: first, the people who have been exposed to the opposite culture for a long time might have adopted different cultural characteristics from the host culture; second, even though the population of this research is college students, it was necessary to diminish demographic variations of each sample as much as possible given the comparative nature of the study. The average age of total respondents was 20.03 (19.85 in high-context culture; 20.29 in low-context culture). Of total respondents, 56 were males and 93 were females and one remained unknown.

Two editions of questionnaire were made for this study; English edition for survey in U. S. and Korean edition for that in Korea. Both of them have exactly the same content. The questionnaire requires each respondent to imagine the first ten minutes of conversation with a person whom he/she has never met before. The conversation occurs at his/her friend's birthday party, and the counterpart is of the same sex as that of the respondent and looks like a college student.

Based on this imaginary situation, the questionnaire was comprised of four parts: (1) self-disclosure about 'background,' 'personal interests and attitude,' and 'sociability' (2) interrogation about 'background,' 'personal interests and attitude,' and 'sociability' (3) predictability about 'personal interests and attitude' and 'sociability,' based on 'background'

information (4) demographic information which include age, sex and exposure to other cultures.

The self-disclosure part and the interrogation part included all of three dimensions while the predictability part dealt with personal interest and attitude and sociability dimensions. Each dimension consisted of five questions, which were measured by 5-point scales. Reliability tests were performed to measure the internal consistency of items included in each dimension. The alpha scores were .56 (self-disclosure about background), .68 (self-disclosure about personal interests and attitude), .64 (self-disclosure about sociability), .61 (interrogation about background), .59 (interrogation about personal interests and attitude), .76 (interrogation about sociability), .51 (predictability about personal interests and attitude), and .63 (predictability about sociability). These scores seem to be acceptable, although not very high.

Results

The hypotheses were tested by using t-tests of differences between means of independent variables (high- and low-context cultures). Every question in the questionnaire had a scale which had a descending order from 1 to 5. In questionnaire, "1" meant the most positive answer, while "5" meant the most negative. When researchers computerized the data, the order was reversed. Therefore, larger number meant more positive in this study. For

instance, if the mean score of interrogation about background in high-context culture was 5, then it would mean that members of high-context culture always ask 'background questions' in initial interactions.

On the basis of results, H1 was accepted. In both high- and low-context cultures, the tendency to talk or interrogate more about background than personal interests and attitude or sociability has been confirmed. Table 1A shows that the frequencies of both self-disclose and interrogation about background are more than about personal interest and attitude. This tendency was common in both high- and low- context cultures. Table 1B shows that the frequencies of both self-disclosure and interrogation about background are more than about sociability.

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Tables 1A and 2A about here

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Table 2 shows H2 was rejected. While Gudykunst (1983) suggested that people from high-context cultures ask more questions about a stranger's background than do members of low-context cultures, the current research findings show the opposite. Besides the interrogation, members of low-context cultures make more self-disclosure about background than those of high-context cultures. The difference between the results of Gudykunst's research and ours is also reflected in Table 3, which shows H3 is partially accepted. The hypothesis that members of high-context cultures will have a greater tendency to interrogate

is accepted, when the content of the interrogation is personal interests and attitude. However, the hypothesis is rejected when the content is background.

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Table 2 and 3 about here

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H4 is rejected as shown in Table 4. The t-test results imply that there are no differences in the degree of certainty in prediction based on background information between high- and low-context culture. This finding corresponds with that of the research done by Gudykunst. As 'background information,' the researchers gave each respondent the counterpart's name, school, major, number of family members, father's occupation, hometown, current residence, and usual spending money. Even if there were some more information about the stranger, the results would not be much different, though the overall scores of certainty in predictions could be higher.

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Table 4 about here

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H5 is also rejected. The result is the opposite of our expectation. Specifically, we found that people have a higher degree of certainty in their prediction about sociability than personal interests and attitude. Although people tend to ask about a stranger's personal interest and attitude earlier than sociability (Berger, Gardener, Clatterbuck & Schulman, 1976), the

information sequencing might not have a connection with the predictability. Probably the main reason is that 'sociability' relates to each respondent him/herself as well as the counterpart, while 'personal interest and attitude' is only related to the other person.

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Table 5 about here

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Summary and Discussion

In summary, there is little difference between high-context cultures and low-context cultures, in respect of communication patterns in initial interactions. Although the test of H2 shows some differences between high- and low-context cultures, a consistent tendency is not found. However, as the result of H1 implies, the researchers found a common ground between high- and low-context cultures in uncertainty reduction styles in initial interactions; In both types of cultures, people exchange 'background' information most in initial interactions. In fact, this hypothesis is one of the most basic and widely accepted one of uncertainty reduction theory. The results of this research extend the applicability of the theory across cultures.

In order to determine how the variables are interrelated, a post hoc correlation analysis was completed. These results are displayed in Table 6.

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Table 6 about here

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There are significant correlations,if not too high, between three dimensions of self-disclosure, and between two dimensions of predictability. People who talk about his/her background frequently also talk about other information frequently (r=.27, r=.40), and people who predict a stranger's personal interest and attitude with greater certainty also tend to predict the stranger's sociability with certainty (r=.50). Another interesting finding is that people tend to use the same topic repeatedly in self-disclosure and the subsequent interrogation and vice versa (between self-disclosure and interrogation about background r=.57, between self-disclosure and interrogation about personal interest and attitude r=.72, between self-disclosure and interrogation about sociability r=.49).

From these findings, it may be inferred that it is not the type of culture that affects the communication pattern, but one's personality which develops an indigenous communication style. Since the results of this research could not prove any significant difference between high- and low-context cultures, it may be concluded that uncertainty reduction theory is applicable throughout cultures.

Last but not least, the researchers would like to call attention to the fact that this study has been done strictly within the theoretical scope that uncertain reduction theory

posits. It also need to be remembered that the study is based upon respondents' perceptions of how they would act in a given situation. The researchers believe that perceptions are in part precursors of actual behaviors. Further study is required to probe people's actual behaviors in initial interactions.

Table 1A: Comparison of frequencies of self-disclosure and interrogation about background with those of personal interests and attitude

	Style of culture	Content	Mean	Degree of freedom	T-value	probability
Self-Disclosure	HIGH	background	3.40	84	8.41	p <.001
		personal	2.77			
	LOW	background	3.73	60	14.33	p <.001
		personal	2.32			
Interrogation	HIGH	background	3.99	85	14.09	p <.001
		personal	2.79			
	LOW	background	4.31	59	16.95	p <.001
		personal	2.57			

Table 1B: Comparison of frequency of self-disclosure and interrogation about background with those of sociability

	Style of culture	Content	Mean	Degree of freedom	T-value	probability
Self-Disclosure	HIGH	background	3.38	84	7.37	p <.001
		sociability	2.82			
	LOW	background	3.72	61	8.88	p <.001
		sociability	2.84			
Interrogation	HIGH	background	4.00	84	15.31	p <.001
		sociability	2.57			
	LOW	background	4.30	60	26.22	p <.001
		sociability	1.75			

Table 2 : frequencies of self-disclosure and interrogation about background

	type of culture	Mean	D.F	T-value	p
Self-Disclosure	High-context culture	3.38	147	-3.31	p <.05*
	Low-context culture	3.72			
Interro-gation	High-context culture	3.99	146	-3.53	p <.001*
	Low-context culture	4.31			

(* : significant, but the opposite direction of the hypothesis)

Table 3: frequencies of interrogation according to the type of culture

content	type of culture	Mean	D.F	T-value	p
Background	High-context culture	3.99	146	-3.53	p <.001*
	Low-context culture	4.31			
Personal interests & attitude	High-context culture	2.80	145	2.12	p <.001
	Low-context culture	2.57			
Sociability	High-context culture	2.57	146	7.58	p <.001
	Low-context culture	1.78			

(* : significant, but the opposite direction of the hypothesis)

Table 4: comparison of degrees of certainty in prediction according to the type of culture

content	type of culture	Mean	D.F	T-value	p
Personal interests & attitude	High-context culture	2.90	144	1.23	**
	Low-context culture	2.78			
Sociability	High-context culture	3.38	144	-1.43	**
	Low-context culture	3.54			

(** : non-significant)

Table 5: comparison of degrees of certainty in prediction according to the content

Type of culture	Content	Mean	D.F	T-value	p
High-context culture	personal	2.89	85	-7.84	p <.001*
	sociability	3.38			
Low-context culture	personal	2.78	57	-8.87	p <.001*
	sociability	3.55			

(* : significant, but the opposite direction of the hypothesis)

Table 6 : Correlation among composite variables

	S-DB	S-DP	S-DS	QUEB	QUEP	QUES	PREP	PRES
S-DB	===							
S-DP	.27*	===						
S-DS	.40*	.48*	===					
QUEB	.57*	.02	.18#	===				
QUEP	.24*	.72*	.49*	.05	===			
QUES	.05	.46*	.49*	-.10	.47*	===		
PREP	.08	.38*	.23*	-.03	.41*	.36*	===	
PRES	.08	.00	.19#	-.01	.16#	.11	.50*	===

(* : p <.01, # : p <.05)

S-DB : Self-Disclosure about background
S-DB : Self-Disclosure about personal interest and attitude
S-DB : Self-Disclosure about sociability
QUEB : Interrogation about background
QUEP : Interrogation about personal interest and attitude
QUES : Interrogation about sociability
PREP : Predictability about personal interest and attitude
PRES : Predictability about sociability

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